

From Ancient Rome to Chicago: Mussolini's Gift of the Balbo Column

Author:

- [Wrigley, Amanda](#) ^[1]

Date of publication: 2010

The Balbo Column (or Balbo Monument) consists of a column from the archaeological site of an ancient Roman temple in Ostia (a harbour town close to Rome), standing on a monument base which is inscribed in Italian and English. The Balbo Column arrived in Chicago in 1934 as a gift from Benito Mussolini's Fascist government on the occasion of the city's 'Century of Progress' world's fair. It was erected in front of the Italian pavilion during the fair and it remains today in its original location, close to the shore of Lake Michigan at 1600 South Lake Shore Drive, just east of Soldier Field.

The gift of this ancient artefact was intended to commemorate the Italian air-force's first transatlantic crossing which was led by General Italo Balbo (1896-1940) in 1933. The Roman column reached America by boat in 1934 and it was formally presented to the city of Chicago in a radio address by Balbo in which he is reported to have said, 'Let this column stand as a symbol of increasing friendship between the people of Italy and the people of the United States' (*The New York Times*, 16 July 1934). Balbo's squadron of over twenty planes had arrived in Chicago in July 1933 to a very enthusiastic welcome: the numerous stages in the lengthy flight received much attention in the American press; Balbo's arrival in Chicago was greeted with the fascist salute; and while in America he was showered with many honours. These included lunch in the White House with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the renaming of Chicago's 7th Street (located close to the Balbo Column) to Balbo Drive. Harry S. New, the head of the Fair, is reported to have commented that 'If Balbo were to remain in the United States, he'd get elected President (Segrè 1990, 264)'. Candeloro reprints a series of evocative photographs of Balbo's visit to America.

Not all supported the warm welcome that Chicago and other American cities extended to Balbo. The Italian Socialist Federation and the Italian League for the Rights of Man, for example, denounced him as a 'terrorist' and a 'murderer' in their 1933 pamphlet 'Who is Balbo?' (Chicago Historical Society, IChi-16152). Following the Second World War, Alberto Tarchiani, the Italian ambassador to the United States, suggested that the marks of respect to Balbo and Mussolini's Fascist government should be removed. Both the column and the street name survived, however, despite such periodic protests. In subsequent decades, both the transatlantic flight and the gift of the ancient column have become for many a strong symbol of Italian-American friendship. In 1973, for example, scores of surviving airmen from the 1933 expedition flew again to Chicago, in the company of Balbo's son, for the city's Columbus Day festivities. Alongside Mayor Richard Daley and Illinois governor Daniel Walker, the airmen walked through the streets of Chicago, before crowds which numbered in the thousands, as they had done forty years earlier.

The base of the monument is inscribed in Italian:

QUESTA COLONNA
DI VENTI SECOLI ANTICA
ERETTA SUL LIDO DI OSTIA
PORTO DI ROMA IMPERIALE
A VIGILARE LE FORTUNE E LE VITTORIE
DELLE TIREMI ROMANE
L'ITALIA FASCISTA SUSPICE BENITO MUSSOLINI
DONA A CHICAGO
ESALTAZIONE SIMBOLO RICORDO
DELLA SQUADRA ATLANTICA GUIDATA DA BALBO
CHE CON ROMANO ARDIMENTO TRASVOLÒ L'OCEANO
NELL'ANNO XI
DEL LITTORIO.

English translation:

THIS COLUMN
TWENTY CENTURIES OLD
ERECTED ON THE SHORES OF OSTIA
PORT OF IMPERIAL ROME
TO WATCH OVER THE FORTUNES AND VICTORIES
OF THE ROMAN TRIREMES
FASCIST ITALY UNDER THE AUSPICES OF BENITO MUSSOLINI
PRESENTS TO CHICAGO
AS EXALTATION, SYMBOL, MEMORIAL
OF THE ATLANTIC SQUADRON LED BY BALBO
THAT WITH ROMAN DARING FLEW ACROSS THE OCEAN
IN THE ELEVENTH YEAR
OF THE FASCIST ERA.

Bibliography

Anon., "Balbo Talks to Chicago: Speaking over Radio from Rome, Presents Column from Forum?", *The New York Times*, 16 July 1934, 15.

Anon., "A Column from Ostia in Chicago?". <http://www.ostia-antica.org/past/chicago.htm> ^[2] (accessed 20 February 2010).

Candeloro, Dominic, *Italians in Chicago*. Chicago: Arcadia, 1999.

Graf, John, and Steve Skorpád, *Chicago's Monuments, Markers, and Memorials*. Chicago: Arcadia, 2002.

Reiff, Janice L., and Ann Durkin Keating, and James R. Grossman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org> ^[3] (accessed 15 March 2010).

Segrè, Claudio G., *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Zukowsky, John, ed., *Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis*.

Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1993.

Source URL: <http://www.classicizingchicago.northwestern.edu/node/129>

Links:

[1] <http://www.classicizingchicago.northwestern.edu/author/wrigley-amanda>

[2] <http://www.ostia-antica.org/past/chicago.htm>

[3] <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org>